

Concordia Journal

Volume 40 | Number 2

Article 19

2014

A LIGHTHEARTED BOOK OF COMMON ERRORS. By Don Hoeferkamp

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Recommended Citation

Rossow, Francis (2014) "A LIGHTHEARTED BOOK OF COMMON ERRORS. By Don Hoeferkamp," *Concordia Journal*: Vol. 40: No. 2, Article 19.

Available at: <http://scholar.csl.edu/cj/vol40/iss2/19>

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A LIGHTHEARTED BOOK OF COMMON ERRORS. By Don Hoeferkamp. Bloomington, IN: Trafford Publishing, 2011. 136 pages. Paper. \$12.99.

Who would have ever anticipated a book on grammar and word usage to be helpful and entertaining at the same time? Don Hoeferkamp's *A Lighthearted Book of Common Errors* is just such a book. As I read it, I laughed—and I learned. You will too.

In providing us this book, the Reverend Hoeferkamp has continued a welcome trend initiated recently by Lynne Truss's *Eats, Shoots & Leaves* and by Patricia T. O'Conner's *Woe Is I*, two books that have rescued us from the rigid pronouncements of stuffy preservers of rules and placed us into the hands of wordsmiths who recognize the potential of grammar, punctuation, correct spelling, and appropriate word usage to augment the vigor and vitality of the English language. Hoeferkamp, like Truss and O'Conner, is neither die-hard nor avant-garde, but, like Baby Bear's porridge, "just right."

Two factors account for the readability and effectiveness of *A Lighthearted Book of Common Errors*. The first factor the author is aware of. "Just a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down" are the opening words of his introduction. That sugar is the author's humor. For example:¹ his tongue-in-cheek definition of a semicolon as "what you have left if part of your colon is removed" (116). Helpful as well as humorous is the author's occasional practice of deliberately committing an error even as he simultaneously corrects it, thereby put-

ting literacy and illiteracy side by side to facilitate the learning process. (See the last paragraph on page 88.)

The second factor accounting for the book's appeal and impact is one that the author is not aware of: his humility. For example, when he argues that "Do you know?" is preferable to "Did you know?" he unobtrusively adds, "I myself am guilty of this habit, if 'guilty' is the right word" (15). (I reluctantly joined him in his humbling mea culpa when in Appendix 1 he discussed the correct pronunciation of "en route.")

Somewhat controversial, perhaps, is the author's fondness for punning. (I like it—thanks to Shakespeare—but not everyone may.) Puns pepper nearly every entry in the book. Hoeferkamp's wit sparkles and dazzles. How about this statement from the entry for "Lie/lay"? "To say something like 'I laid down' is to lay an egg. But I will lay you odds that laying down the law about using 'lie' and 'lay' correctly may get you laid into by laypersons who lie in wait in the secret lairs of their selfimposed layers of defense mechanisms" (51). (I wonder how long he lay awake at night composing that statement!)

To be sure, there is much more to good writing and speaking than correct usage, correct grammar, correct spelling, and correct punctuation. Creativity, profundity, organization, clarity, word choice, word arrangement, all are more important. But it does not follow from this that correctness is unimportant. Correctness is a prerequisite, a qualifier, for good writing and speaking. No one will consider a man in a tuxedo well dressed if his shoes are caked with mud. Who hasn't recoiled, for example,²

at the preacher who says, “Jesus died for you and I”? His theology is sound (thank God) and his assertion remains good news, but his atrocious grammar diminishes the quality of what otherwise may be a fabulous sermon as well as the authority of him who preaches it.

I have a handout for my homiletics students titled “In Defense of Literacy,” which I orally subtitle “A Theology of Language.” In this handout I maintain that God’s choice of language (words) to communicate his Word (Jesus) indicates the inseparableness of message from medium. God harnesses the unique power of his Word to the magic of human language. “In, with, and under” the words of gospel we write and speak, God’s Word is truly present. For the proclamation of his gospel God’s method is not monergistic (God without man). Nor is his method synergistic (God and man). Rather his method is transformative (God through man). It is, therefore, incumbent upon us who proclaim his gospel to master the medium of language in all its correctness and vitality, not with the false assumption that by that mastery we are helping God do his job but with the prayerful hope that through our language skills the word of God “as becometh it, may not be bound, but have free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ’s holy people.”

Don Hoferkamp’s remarkable book can contribute to that end.

Francis C. Rossow

Endnotes

¹ Here I follow Pastor Hoferkamp’s advice (40) to put the expression “for example” at the start of a sentence rather than inside it.

² Whoops!